

THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF KOREAN NEOLITHIC SITES

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Korean archaeologists have looked at social structure in Neolithic sites in at least two ways. In the North it is assumed, based on the Marxist canon, that the Neolithic represents a matriarchal stage in cultural evolution. This is not considered to require proof; it is understood to be a necessary development before the higher form of patriarchy could evolve. When the subsistence base allows sedentism but there are no signs of ranking, then a matriarchy is presumed (e.g., FLPH 1977:5).

In the South many archaeologists have jumped on the American evolutionary bandwagon, finding bands, tribes, chiefdoms, or states as might seem appropriate to the level of complexity of the sites (e.g., Choi 1984:43). Therefore, Neolithic sites are declared to be tribal and all that cannot be inferred directly from the assemblage can be filled in with what is known about tribes. Although I have been guilty of this myself (Nelson 1987), I have become increasingly uneasy about this procedure. If we already know all about tribes, or all about matriarchies, why don't we let the artifacts lie in the ground? What is the point of finding yet another example of what we already know? The point, of course, is to increase knowledge of culture history - that often sneered at goal of 'old' archaeology. Korean archaeology is primarily a search for the roots of Korean ethnicity and a validation of the uniqueness of Korean culture (e.g., Sohn *et al.* 1987).

As an American with a primary interest in Korean archaeology, I bring an outsider's perspective to bear on the Korean data. My perspective, however, is not opposed to the goals of Korean archaeologists. I believe that an understanding of process must be grounded in an understanding of the details of culture history, and that continuity of culture is a phenomenon not often enough noted or theoretically analysed. What I would like to do in this paper is to consider the Neolithic through the lens of Korean culture history, and to attempt to delineate aspects of Neolithic social structure by utilizing specific data from Neolithic sites.

CLASSES OF PRIMARY DATA

Several classes of data which may be useful in the search for social structure are reported from Neolithic sites in Korea. These include structures and their spatial arrangements, shell and faunal remains, tools made of various materials, ornaments, ceremonial objects and burials.

After briefly describing the nature of these classes of data in the Korean Neolithic I will consider the inferences that may be drawn from them, and how these inferences help us reconstruct social structure.

Structures

Dwelling floors in the Korean Neolithic have many features in common throughout the peninsula. They are almost always small, in the range of 3 to 5 metres in diameter when round, or up to 5 metres in greatest dimension when subrectangular. They are always semisubterranean, being dug down from 30 centimetres to one metre below the contemporaneous ground surface. A single square central hearth, delineated by river cobbles set on edge, is found in each dwelling. There are cases of two hearths in one dwelling at Osanni (Im 1987), and of five hearths at Sopohang (Kim and So 1972), but such cases are very unusual. Treatment of the floor varies from burnt clay to whitewash to bare ground. Postholes show a variety of patterns, but all suggest a superstructure built of poles and thatch (Kim 1976; Lim 1985). These structures suggest small units of people who slept and (probably) cooked together. Since no large structure which might have been a communal unisex house has ever been found, it is reasonable to suppose that the dwellings housed nuclear family units usually consisting of one adult woman, one adult man and their children.

Spatial Distributions

Only a few sites have been excavated in ways that provide evidence of the village layout. At both Amsadong (Im 1985) and Sopohang (Kim and So 1972) the dwellings are compactly located, with as little as a metre distance between houses. Exact contemporaneity is problematical, yet the regularity of the pattern of house placement at Amsadong suggests both continuity at the site (because new houses are placed approximately where old ones were) and a habit of clustering houses together rather tightly, with other activities on the periphery. Some outdoor storage pits, an occasional structure without a hearth (as at Osanni; Im and Kwon 1984), concentrations of large storage pots (at Amsadong; Lim Byung-tae, personal communication), and two areas paved with river cobbles at Amsadong (Im 1985) suggest communal activities in the village.

Shell and Faunal Remains

In general, animal bones have been preserved only in shell middens, skewing our view of the subsistence base in favour of shell midden sites. Nevertheless, deer and wild boar or domesticated pig are the commonest mammal bones found. Fish species include deep sea fish as well as those that live near the shore, and sea mammals are also found (Sample 1974; Kim 1978; Sohn 1982). The Shellfish species that form the middens vary in frequency through time, but no study has ever been done to understand the reasons for these variations - whether climatic or cultural. If the coastal populations were hunting deer and boar, or had domesticated pigs, it seems reasonable to suppose that inland peoples exploited these resources too.

Tools

Tool classes include bone fish-hooks, awls, netting needles and harpoons; stone axes, grinding stones, weights and projectile points; antler digging implements; and pottery spindle whorls. The weights have different forms at different sites, and sometimes there are two distinct sizes of the same form at a single site (Nelson 1975). Spindle whorls have only been reported in the north (e.g., Kim and So 1972).

Containers

Most surviving containers are made of baked clay although an occasional stone bowl has been found. Pottery vessels vary considerably in size and shape throughout the peninsula, but some decorative patterns are similar everywhere (Arimitsu 1962). Variations in size do allow some inferences about social structure; for example, very large pots grouped together in a site might imply communal storage for the winter.

Ornaments

Bracelets were made of shell or stone, and pendants of many materials - claw, tusk, shell, bone, quartz. Nothing in their distribution suggests that there was unequal access to these ornaments or to the materials of which they were made.

Ceremonial Objects

In East Coast sites a variety of objects have been found which appear to have had ritual functions. Small crude statuettes of animals (snake and possibly dog) were found at Sopohang, along with oddly-shaped carved bones that are interpreted as anthropomorphic figurines (Kim and So 1972). Mask-like objects also appear, made of shell or clay (Im and Kwon 1984). The inhabitants of forest-oriented sites may have created their ritual objects from wood; wooden *changsung* as village guardians are still made in isolated locations today (Kim 1983).

Burials

There are only two known burial assemblages from the Korean Neolithic, and they are completely different. Probably both are rather late, judging from the accompanying grave goods. One was found in the southeast, a communal burial of 6 whole skeletons and several extra skulls. The only grave goods were 34 finely polished stone axes, some made of exotic stone (Han Byong-sam, personal communication). The other burials were in a cave in the central part of the peninsula. Three extended skeletons radiated out, with their feet toward the centre. A number of small flat-based pots were buried with them (Kim 1968).

The first question to address in trying to reconstruct the social structure of Korean Neolithic sites is whether it is proper to assume that society was the same throughout the peninsula. The justification for such an assumption is the similarity in pottery styles which suggests either a communication network or a common ancestry for the sites, possibly both. At the crude level at which we must work, given the data at hand, it is not unreasonable to generalize from one

site to the entire peninsula, and given the spotty preservation of some classes of data it is necessary.

FIRST LEVEL INFERENCES

Given the primary data that have been presented, some first level inferences can be made about the size of an average social group, the subsistence base, organization of production, and the heritability of valuables.

Social Group Size

The house floors imply small family units for all sites, at least as the co-dormal group. Sites are fairly small, with more than 20 contemporaneous dwellings a rare phenomenon. Thus we should not look for complex social structure at the village level. It is difficult to assess variation in size between villages, since few have been excavated in their entirety.

Subsistence Base

Fishing clearly played a large part in the subsistence of these villages. Not only are there accumulations of fish and sea mammal bones in the coastal sites, but also there are several kinds of fishhooks and weights which may have been attached to nets. Even the inhabitants of riverine sites were probably exploiting river fish, although that is less clear from the remains at those sites. Grinding stones and hoes, more prevalent in the inland sites, suggest incipient domestication of plants. Hunting of wild animals is attested by the presence of deer bones. At what stage and where pigs were first domesticated has not been studied in the south. There are claims for domesticated pigs and dogs in the Neolithic of the north.

Organization of Production

Features on the sites suggest some communal activities, such as food storage, and by extension the preparation of that food for storage. On the other hand, there is enough variability in the designs on the pottery at each site to indicate that each household probably made its own. Chipped stone tools are rather crudely executed, and probably were made expediently. In contrast the polished stone and bone tools are sometimes finely made, and may have been produced by specialists. Deep sea fishing must have required some communal effort - how much depending on the sizes of the boats, for which we have as yet no clue. There is no way to tell whether the fetish-like statuettes were used in communal, family or individual rites. There is nothing to suggest any productive dependence between villages, and it seems likely that basic production was organized on a village level.

Heritability of Valuables

Inland sites are spaced along rivers with at least 2 to 3 kilometres between them, thus allowing enough land to grow a few crops without encroaching on their neighbours. Although the best agricultural land available without irrigation occurs on the river banks, pressure on crop land does not seem to have been a problem. One reason for the development of lineages relates to heritability of scarce resources. If an individual must be assigned to one and only one group, it

is usually for the purpose of allocating land or animals which are necessary for survival. I would argue that in the early Neolithic in Korea there was neither population pressure nor an inheritable subsistence necessity, while later, as plant domestication became more intensive, inheritance of land probably became important. Thus I would expect a shift from village units of cognatically related people with land available to anyone willing to clear a new plot, to a lineage system focused on corporate management and inheritance of land.

It is time to move to a consideration of Korean culture history. Is it possible to read back into the past some traditions and traits which seems to be uniquely Korean? Can we see the glimmerings of Korean-ness in the Neolithic? Based on an expectation of some continuity of culture, I think some aspects of Korean folk culture shed some light on the problem of social structure during the Neolithic.

Lineages

Korean society today is patrilineal, and based on Confucian values. Yet there are several contradictions within that ideal. One of the most obvious is the continued place of women in the ceremonial life of villages. *Mudangs* (shamans or priestesses) have a very public role in village renewal ceremonies (Kendall 1985). There are both male and female wooden guardian figures, keeping evil and bad luck out of the village (Kim, T.G. 1983). The fact that there were ruling queens as late as the 8th century demonstrates that women were valued before Confucianism held sway (Nelson 1988). Rules for descent in the Silla Kingdom are somewhat obscured by the Buddhist and Confucian veils through which the histories have come down to us, but constructing family trees of the rulers reveals that the mother was as important as the father in defining eligibility to rule (Grayson 1976). It was not patrilineal descent that was important, but the purity of the bone rank on both sides. All this suggests that patrilineages are unlikely to have been the pattern in Korean Neolithic society.

Matrilineages

If we must posit lineages, then matrilineages seem more likely than patrilineages since the status of women seems to have been equal to that of men. But the only argument in favour of lineages at all is the need to inherit land. Since there are no signs of crowding of sites, we might suppose that when a given village outgrew its space a group from that village would strike out and find a free stretch of coast or river bank. So might the interior of Korea have become populated by agriculturalists.

My conclusions about the social structure of Korean Neolithic sites are therefore as follows. It seems likely that the village itself was the main social unit, with subunits composed of nuclear families. Although there are no direct clues about any division of labour it seems likely that men and women were equally valued and mutually dependent. The evidence does not favour lineages.

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